LITTLE AMERICA
Little America

DIANE SIMMONS
To my father, Dale Ellis,
who always looked good in a stockman’s hat
Contents

Acknowledgments • ix

Little America • 1
Suitcase • 13
Holy Sisters • 24
In the Garden • 39
Ticket • 50
Letters • 63
Roll • 93
Yukon River • 101
Acknowledgments

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Some of these stories have been previously published elsewhere:

They’d all blow in to some hick town where Hank and Lorraine would put on a program in a hall they’d hired for the night. Gorgeous in aviators and rattlesnake books, Hank jumped and spun and flirted with ladies and men alike as Lorraine chain-smoked and flipped charts that showed how people in other towns had gotten richer and happier and even better-looking since they’d bought whatever it was Hank happened to be selling. When it was over—sometimes even before it was over—they’d jump in the car and speed out of there, driving a hundred miles before stopping to sleep, Hank harmonizing with the radio all the way.

Billie—who spent these evenings watching TV in the motel room if they had one, or reading romance novels in the back of the hall if they didn’t—knew they were crooks of some sort. Beyond that, she didn’t know much, such as where they came from or what their real names were. Even the idea of a “real name”—as opposed to the name you were using just then—was something she didn’t pick up until the third grade when the teacher asked why she had started writing Bunny Miller on her papers instead of Billie Moore.

Billie made a rule for herself then: don’t change your name unless you have to. And she kept Billie for many years, even when Hank and Lorraine went to Mel and Monica and then Clark and Inez. Whatever Hank—as Billie always thought of him—was up to, it required a lot of travel and over the years a variety of cars. A few of them were purring and fragrant; most were banging and stinking of other people’s cigarettes or, especially in the backseat where Billie rode, throw-up.
Whatever sort of car it was, the first thing Hank did was install a telescoping rod across the backseat so he could hang up his clothes. Billie rode along back there in a forest of swaying cowboy shirts and fringe-sleeved jackets, all smelling deliciously of Hank’s aftershave and sweat.

No matter what had just happened, Hank was always happy driving along. He loved every kind of scenery and was always telling Billie to look out the window to see how the tall grass seemed to be racing away in the wind or how the high mountains looked just exactly like frosted glass. One memorable dawn in Eastern Oregon—up early to beat a wide-awake motel operator and wanting to avoid troopers on Interstate 84—they had headed south from Pendleton on a two-lane road through the wheat fields. As the dawn began to creep over the vast, unbroken fields of ripe wheat, Hank was so overwhelmed he stopped the car. Lorraine wouldn’t wake up and look, but Hank and Billie stood by the side of the road for fifteen minutes watching the purple, then pink-soaked wheat turn the purest gold, as far as the eye could see.

“What would you have to pay to see something like that?” Hank asked when they finally got back in the car.

While Hank could be brought almost to tears by the scenery of the West, he had nothing but pity for the squares in the little towns they passed through. His scorn he saved for the men who worked in the stores, men who seemed to think they were something because they stood behind a cash register in a white shirt and a clip-on tie.

Hank had a little more respect for the farmers and ranchers; at least they were out in scenery. Still, when he saw somebody out on a tractor plowing in big slow circles, he would ask, “What could they be thinking about all the time?”

Lorraine, who was said to be Billie’s mother, spent most of her time smoking and didn’t talk much, though Hank, maybe as a joke, said she was the brains of the outfit.

“You can tell she used to be a preacher’s wife,” Hank would say. Billie was pretty sure that was a joke.

Lorraine didn’t talk to or look at Billie unnecessarily, and Billie was certain that if she got left behind at a filling station bathroom one day, Lorraine would not be coming back to pick her up. Hank probably would if they remembered in time and weren’t like three hundred miles away already.

“Where was I born?” Billie asked Lorraine once when they were alone. Lorraine blew out a nose full of smoke.

“Montana,” she said.
But when Billie asked Hank separately, he answered without hesitation: “Rock Springs, Wyoming. What a pit that was.”

Of course they never wanted to slip into the habit of telling the truth.

Lorraine and Billie seemed weakly linked, if at all, but Hank and Billie both had the same curly red-orange hair so that waitresses seeing them often said, “I guess I know who your Daddy is!”

Hank was tall and trim, and when he got dressed up, which was most of the time, he looked just like a movie star. No matter what, he had to have good boots and a newish cowboy hat. Just about the only time he really lost his good humor was if somebody disturbed his hat where it rode on the little ledge above the backseat. It had to sit there all alone because if you crowded stuff beside it, the brim would curl up wrong. Then too, during one period when they must have been flush, he got himself a necktie made of real mink. When he took it off, he would wrap it up in an old silk neckerchief, then carefully stuff it inside a cardboard toilet-paper tube.

Besides being good-looking and well-dressed, Hank was also a little bit famous, having once been the object of an investigation by the Idaho attorney general. He’d been in the newspaper for it, and just before they left Idaho and crossed into Wyoming, he’d bought several editions of the paper and then carefully ripped out of each the articles that had his name in it. He folded the articles and put them in his little leather bag of important things.

At one point, waiting alone in a motel room somewhere, Billie had taken the article out and read it but hadn’t found out much besides that Hank was selling something he shouldn’t.

It was exciting to see his name in print though.

“We don’t hurt anybody much,” Hank told her after they’d been run out of Idaho. It was the one time they talked about business. “And sometimes we do them some good.”

This talk took place in a window booth at truck stop called Little America that they’d reached after a couple of days driving east through Wyoming. They’d been seeing signs for it, practically since Idaho, so many signs, in fact, that Billie figured it would be a big nothing. When they got there, though, it was the biggest, fanciest truck stop, surely in the world, with parking for maybe a hundred tractor trailers.

They’d gotten there late and slept in the car—Hank and Lorraine
tilted back in the front seats, Billie snuggled amid the bags and bundles in
the back. All night they could hear the soothing whine of the high-speed
trucks approaching then departing across the flat plain.

Lorraine was still sleeping when Billie and Hank unfolded themselves
from the car and went into the fine restaurant there. Hank sat over his tea
with lemon, and Billie with a root beer. It was a pink, hopeful dawn and
there was a cheerful waitress who winked and slipped Billie a free dough-
nut for getting up so early and for having such a good-looking daddy. Bil-
lie loved it when waitresses flirted with Hank, because then they almost
never ran out on the bill. It was nice to eat without thinking about your
exit, even though Hank—who hated paying for things or letting go of his
money in any way—would be a little grumpy for half an hour because of
it.

“We may not be one hundred percent on the up-and-up,” Hank had
told Billie as they sat in Little America. “But it’s only fraud. And fraud
isn’t violent.”

Hank stopped and looked out over the lines of trucks and the immense
blue sky. Billie was a little worried to hear him speak so soberly and won-
dered if they were really in trouble. But it seemed it was only the gran-
deur of early morning at Little America that had caused him to be so
thoughtful.

“I’ve known violent people,” Hank said, “and not one of them could
make a plan or talk their way out of a paper bag. Well, I don’t have much
respect for that type of person. And maybe it isn’t nice to say so”—here he
paused and looked back into the kitchen where you could see a fat, hairy
cook smacking the grill with a giant spatula—“but I think you’ll find that
violent people are almost always, well, almost always, unattractive to look
at.”

The next time she found herself in a schoolroom, Billie tried to look up
“fraud,” but it wasn’t, evidently, spelled like it sounded. She knew enough,
of course, not to ask the teacher what it meant.

As Billie was in her adolescent years, they seemed to have drifted more
to the east, maybe because of being famous in Idaho. The winter she was
sixteen, they’d come to perch briefly in Grand Island, Nebraska, waiting
out the worst of the cold weather before making one of their big swings
down through Kansas, then back up through Colorado and Wyoming.
Hank had found them an old bullet-shaped, thirty-foot trailer in a six-trailer court. It wasn’t far from the tracks, and all night long you heard the slow freight trains go clacking past, which was probably why Hank had picked it.

The place was run by an obese and filthy woman named Stella who couldn’t stop flirting with Hank.

“‘I’ll get you, boy!’” she would yell out the door when he passed by her trailer. “Wait’ll I get my teeth!”

Stella ignored Lorraine and Billie, but every day around noon she would come flopping over to their trailer to see Hank. She wore an old bathrobe, obscenely held together over her massive chest with a safety pin, and carried a tin pie plate in her hand.

“Here’s your grits, boy!” she’d yell, pounding on their trailer until Hank came out. “Steamin’ hot!”

Billie could take the bathrobe and the grits; that was Hank’s problem. But she hated the signs Stella had up all over, scrawled on boards in smeary lipstick with a spelling that was completely made up. Some were advertising the trailer court; most were warning trespassers what Stella would do to them if they dared come on her property. There was something terrifying about the bright-red ignorance of those signs. How, Billie wondered, did some little kid end up being Stella?

It was during those winter months that Billie gave up on school and started spending the day at the Grand Island Library reading all the romance novels. It was a cozy place with leather chairs and nice lamps, and the librarian, who admired Billie for coming to Grand Island to help nurse her old aunt, was always looking for new books Billie might like.

It was about this time too that Lorraine kind of disappeared—Hank said something about her visiting family—and in her place there was someone named Pam. Pam talked more than Lorraine and was better-looking, probably, in a plucked sort of way. She also seemed to be a whole lot dumber.

There wasn’t any question of whether or not she was Billie’s mother which was kind of a relief. In fact, Pam kept trying to make Hank admit that she and Billie looked like sisters.

“I’m closer to her age than yours,” she would say to Hank. “We could be your two teenage daughters. Let’s watch and see if people take us as sisters.”

They didn’t look a thing alike, of course, even though Pam’s hair was some kind of bottle orange.

When the topic of how Billie and Pam looked like sisters lost its kick,
it got replaced by a discussion along the lines of what was Billie going to do. It made her wonder what had happened to Lorraine anyway.

Billie had had the odd boyfriend here and there; none of them had done that much for her and she wondered if the whole thing wasn’t something mostly made up to sell books. But now, to hedge her bets, she took up with a dark-haired, wet-handed boy named Tom who she met at the library.

Tom was in his second year at the nearby Nazarene College and wanted to become a fourth-grade teacher. He was an anxious, yearning boy who thought Billie was beautiful and who was desperate for sex even though he didn’t believe in going all the way until marriage. Around five in the afternoon, he would pick her up at the library where she told him she always went to study after school. They drove out to park at a gravel pit outside of town, and there on the front seat with the heater blasting did everything but go all the way until six-thirty when he had to be home for dinner. He would drop her off at a big Victorian house where he thought she lived with that same elderly aunt, and she would walk the fifteen blocks to the trailer court.

Being sex-crazy was one thing about Tom. The other thing about him was his mother, Marge, who was a real mother type with the apron and the stuff cooking and the sewing box with the red tomato pincushion. And who, when she saw Tom coming home all hot and smeary with his shirttail out, quickly found out about Billie and invited her to dinner. She knew Tom was losing his mind over sex and she worried, as she told Billie while they washed up the dinner dishes together, because Tom’s other girl friends had been the type of little hot-pants numbers that were bound to keep him from achieving his goals.

“But you seem different,” Marge said. “You are so quiet and thoughtful. I always hoped Tom would find a girl like you.”

“Well,” Billie said. “I guess being an orphan makes you different.”

“Maybe you’ll be my daughter one day,” Marge said, looking so frankly and hopefully into Billie’s eyes that Billie could not help shuddering slightly. Seeing the shudder, Marge gave Billie a big squeezy hug.

It was only a backup plan, but it’s good to plan because one day, sure enough, Billie came home from an afternoon with Tom to find Pam in the back of the trailer packing up, and Hank standing in the trailer’s little front room clearing his throat. He said he was glad to see her because he had something for her: two New Mexico driver’s licenses, one under the name Billie Moore, and another under the name of Lola Lester. Both put
her age at eighteen, which would make her old enough to be on her own.

Hank handed over the I.D., cleared his throat, and looked out the door of the little trailer and finally said that he and Pam had to leave town unexpectedly, and, instead of taking Billie with them, they were planning to put her on a bus to Winnemucca where Hank had heard a young person could get a job in the casinos and do real well. Start off in Winnemucca, Hank advised; then work up to Reno. She should stay away from Las Vegas, though, because Hank had heard it was full of show-offs.

They stood there in the little old trailer house and looked at each other. Hank cleared his throat again.

“You’ll make it just fine,” Hank said. “Sharp girl like you.”

“I’ll need a stake,” Billie said.

“Oh, well sure,” Hank said, shifting around a little and caressing the bills in his pocket. “Sure you will.”

“I’ll pay you back when I get set up,” she said.

They both smiled at this.

They packed the car late that night, using the flashlights they had for such moments even though Stella, who hadn’t been paid any rent yet, was always dead drunk by midnight; you could hear her snore all over the court. Still it always felt good to clear out invisibly before daybreak, and they eased past Stella’s trailer in first gear. They drove to the Grand Island bus depot, and while Pam waited in a no-parking zone, Hank and Billie went in to buy a ticket to Winnemucca.

Hank said he and Pam would send their new address right away. Billie said she’d send her address too, but of course neither of them would be likely to have an address any time soon and then where would you send it? Looking off in another direction, Hank slid her four fifty-dollar bills and gruffly told her to put it under the insole of her shoe. After she’d done it, he suddenly pulled out one more fifty-dollar bill and put it in her hand.

She knew he hadn’t meant to give her the last fifty and for the first time she felt like crying.

“I’ll pay you back,” she said.

He looked away, cleared his throat a couple of times.

“Oh,” he said. “Only if you’re flush.”

When the eastbound bus pulled in at four-twenty, Hank saw her on, saw her suitcase into the cargo space underneath. Then, from inside the dark, cigarette-and-upholstery-cleaner-smelling bus, she watched him turn and walk away, tall and square shouldered, resetting his hat as he went.
Once he was gone, she got off the bus, got her bag from underneath, and went in to the depot to get the ticket refunded. She sat in the station until daylight, then took the station cab to Tom’s house where she told Tom’s mother that her aunt had died and another aunt, a mean one, had taken four days off work to drive out from Winnemucca and have a cremation. Now this aunt was going to take Billie back with her and put her to work in the casinos. Of course Marge invited Billie to move right in with them. She put Tom down in the basement for safety, giving Billie his room which was next to Marge’s own.

Who knows how this might have turned out if Marge hadn’t been quite so determined to love Billie as if she were her own child. But she was determined, and it meant that, for one thing, she wanted to share feelings with Billie, to talk about her dear deceased husband and her failure to have a second child. Then too she wanted to talk about Billie’s lost parents and the poor deceased aunt. In this way, Marge seemed to think, they would grow close. But Billie didn’t know much about sharing feelings unless it was about mountains or dawn or something. Otherwise, feelings had seemed to be something you made up when people seemed to want you to. But while it had been easy enough to make up stuff up to tell people you weren’t going to see again, here, stuck with Marge all the time, you had to remember what you’d said in way that was both nerve-wracking and tedious.

The one feeling Billie did have, maybe, was missing Hank. She seemed to miss most of all how the back of his head looked with his hat set at a very slight tilt, and the way he would look up and give her a wink in the rearview mirror. But there wasn’t any point in talking to Marge about that. Anyway, Billie was supposed to be an orphan.

It was as much to get away from living with Marge as it was to keep Tom from exploding that Billie agreed to get married. Marge arranged for them to have a little wedding at the justice of the peace. The three of them drove over to his house one evening and made him get up from *Gunsmoke* and go into his little study where he had a desk and a book of wedding certificates. His wife came in as a witness and they stood there and did it, all the time hearing the sound of gunfire coming from the front room.

Then they went back to the little one-bedroom house that Marge had gotten set up for them, stocking it with old sheets and dishes that she’d been saving, and a box of condoms for their bedside table, since they couldn’t start a family until Tom graduated.

As far as Tom was concerned, things went pretty well. He was at school or work most of the time, trying to graduate early so he could start
supporting a family. He ate his supper while he was at his job as a campus security guard, so there wasn’t need for much when he got home late but sex and sleep. He was a boy who tried to do what was expected of him, and if he got to screw every night, things were just fine.

Marge was more complicated, and—as Billie should probably have known—getting married didn’t get rid of her. In fact, it made her worse, because now she wanted to help Billie fix up the little house and to teach her the tricks of housekeeping that Billie, as an orphan, had missed out on. In theory Billie liked the idea of a fixed-up house; sometimes in the past she had felt a little jealous when she glimpsed the luxury of other people’s lives. In practice, though, a fixed-up house turned out to be way more trouble than it was worth. She was shocked, for instance, to find out what you went through to make and put up curtains in just one room: the measuring, the shopping, the cutting and sewing, the screwing of stuff up to the wall, the standing back to see if it was crooked, the taking it down and putting it up again.

Billie decided the house was fine like it was. It was better than a lot of places.

Like a lot of people who don’t want to do housework, she got herself a job, working the lunch shift at a truck-stop restaurant and motel out on the interstate. It’s true she couldn’t bring herself to show up every day; going every day made you seem like such a suck-up. But her boss, Mr. Rexley, was a nice old man who liked to look at girls with good legs, and who seemed to buy her story about emergencies with a mother who had gone senile.

Billie was surprised to see that having a job wasn’t that bad. It was kind of fun, for a change, to be on the other side of the counter and to ironically eye those who came in, as she and Hank had been eyed so many times. Also it was interesting to see that all the waitresses and busboys smuggled out food. That you could be legit and steal at the same time; Billie wondered if Hank had realized such a thing was possible. Of course she liked the tips that nobody reported, that there was no reason for Tom or Marge to know the extent of, and that Billie converted into big bills and stored—along with Hank’s fifties—in the sole of her shoe.

In a way, the job was a kind of halfway house between the straight life and the road. It was close enough to the interstate that you could step out the back for a minute, squat down on your heels, lean your back against the cinder-block wall and listen to the whine of the trucks. Then you could
go back in and pick up a coffeepot and slide dollar bills into your apron pocket.

And then too there were times when she liked getting back to her own little house after a shift at work. She’d walk the half-mile from the bus stop, let herself in the back door, and sit down in her uniform and coat at the kitchen table, feeling the kind of pleasant tiredness that work could give you. She’d sit eating cold sirloin steak out of the sack she’d smuggled it home in, licking the grease off her fingers, and reading a romance in the pink afternoon light that came in from the west. At such moments she might have said she was happy, and maybe if it could have been like that most of the time, she would have slowly gotten tamed.

But so often there was Marge at the back door, loaded down with shelf paper and paint samples and recipes, looking right in because of course there were no curtains yet.

“Honey,” Marge would say, dropping all the stuff on the table. “Turn on the heat when you come home, Dear, and the lights. Take off your coat for goodness’ sake. Shall we make some brownies to treat Tom later? I can show you how to make his favorites. Did you shop?”

Marge would open the refrigerator where there might be only a jar of mayonnaise and a petrified lemon.

“Shall we go to Safeway? Next time, though, why not shop the Tuesday specials?”

Marge was determined to be patient and loving. She could understand that someone had never learned how to make a nice home. What she probably couldn’t get was that you wouldn’t want to learn. And she was no doubt a little scared; the marriage had, after all, been pretty much her idea. So she wasn’t about to give up.

Meanwhile Billie did what she’d always done when people got too interested in what was really going on with her, which was to go blank, sometimes sitting with her finger in her book until Marge finally left, close to tears. Then Billie couldn’t stand the house. The house was just another version of Marge, wanting every impossible thing from her and never letting her get a minute’s peace. Then she would put on her coat to walk to 7-Eleven and shoplift something.

She got so that instead of going home after her shift, she would bribe one of the Mexican chambermaids to let her into an unused room. She would lie carefully on one of the beds and read until it was too late for Marge to come over. Or she would draw a bath and sit in the hot water and not think.
“You like horses?” asked some tall, skinny, cowboy type who’d ordered the Blue Plate Special steak dinner, mashed potato and French fries, cherry pie à la mode with an extra scoop.

“No,” she said, filling his coffee cup and moving on. You work a truck stop for five minutes and you find out everybody has something cute to say.

“Can you ride?” he asked when she passed back by.

“No,” she said.

“Look,” he said when she passed by the next time. He glanced out the plate-glass window toward a shiny new pickup truck with a horse trailer hitched to the back. “That’s mine.”

“Rooty-toot-toot,” Billie said.

He laughed at that. She saw that he wasn’t that old. Twenty-something, maybe.

“Why don’t you come with me up to Montana to a rodeo,” he said. “It’s a good rodeo. Good purse. I’ll win it. I’m a bulldogging champ. I took the grand prize in Nampa. That’s how I got my truck. That and another big purse I won down in Utah.”

He nodded out the window again toward the shiny truck.

“Come with me,” he said. “I could use a girl.”

“What for?”

“Girls take your mind off of things,” he said. “Keep you from getting too keyed up. The right girl anyhow. Not some Mama’s girl. You know.”

“I’m married,” she said.

She held up her left hand with its thin gold ring.

“Oh yeah? Who too?”

“This kid. He’s in college. He’s going to be a teacher.”

“Teacher, huh? Must be smart. Must be some stud to rate a girl like you.”

“He’s OK.”

Billie went to get a lady’s banana cream pie from the pie case. Outside the window the new pickup gleamed. She’d thought it was greenish but really it was more of a midnight blue.

“Only,” he said, when she had to pass down the counter again, “Montana is so pretty this time of year. I don’t know if you’ve ever been up there. Probably not, huh?”

“Yeah, I’ve been up there. I’ve probably been up there more than you. I’m not from here.”
“But you’re here now. Looks like.”

Billie gave him his check. Maybe if he’d walked over to the cashier to pay, that would have been that. Instead he took the check, reset his hat, and walked unhurried past the cashier’s stand where Mr. Rexley, his glasses up on his forehead, a rubber tip on his thumb, and a frown on his face, was counting and recounting a pile of singles.
Yukon River

It’s mostly drunk Indians where I’m working at the moment. Better than mostly white guys. Indians just drink. White guys, it’s got to be you look like somebody.

One night this guy Len shows up; he’s stopping in Seattle to get some final stuff before heading to Alaska. He’s going to settle on some land he bought, out in the bush, way up the Yukon River. He doesn’t think I look like anybody but he wants me to come with him.

Every night he waits for me in the Doughnut Hole two doors down. It’s a dump and nobody’s ever there but him and a bum lady, Irene. Irene tells Len things she has learned from messages coded into license plates of cars that go by on First Avenue. She tells him he was burned at the stake in a previous life so not to worry about that again. He should watch out for green death rays though. Don’t worry about the other colors, Irene says. Len frowns, listening carefully so that Irene won’t feel bad.

In the dead white light of the Hole, Irene looks like she’s a hundred. But if you look close, you see she’s not all that old. Forty maybe. Maybe less. Maybe a beat-up thirty-five, even. I’m twenty-nine so I probably look about sixty.

Len, though, with his clear, bright eyes and his long, soft, gently waving hair, is always beautiful, no matter the light. My first thought was: he’s too good for me. My second thought: I know him from somewhere. My third thought: he looks exactly like the picture of Jesus Grandma used to keep on the piano.
Len is beautiful despite no-good parents and bad foster homes and even a stint in prison. In fact, it was on a top bunk in the never-ending roar of the California State Prison at Folsom that he started reading about Alaska, going every night into its immense and perfect silence. He read everything there was on Alaska. Then he got an idea. Go there really. Go someplace where you can make up your own life. Where nothing is ugly. Where there’s nobody else to screw things up. Go someplace that’s the opposite of prison.

When he got out he did a few big but careful drug deals to fund the Alaska thing. When he had the money, he read the advertisements and finally found somebody with land to sell. Once he’d closed the deal, he had enough left over for a truck and other gear. Now, he’s finished with all that drug stuff forever. He won’t need it anymore.

He looks at me, wide-eyed with wonder and belief.

It was the final drug deals that sold me on going along with him; I’m not sure why. Just, I guess, it’s not all magic.

“What will we do,” I ask, “once we were are out there?”

Len can tell me because he knows everything about subsistence life in the bush. He knows how we’ll pull salmon out of the river, cut them in strips, brine them and dry them. How those pickled salmon strips will eat like candy all winter. He knows how we’ll collect berries in the hills around our place—blueberries, blackberries, salmon berries, all in unbelievable abundance—and make them into jam and pies and berry bread. He knows how in the summer we’ll float the gleaming river at midnight, and how in the winter we’ll sleep tight and warm as goslings in our good-to-fifty-below goose-down bags.

He knows how we’ll build a log sauna, and how we’ll sit there together, glowing and cleansing during even the longest and darkest nights.

He knows too that this isn’t really my question.

“What do you do anywhere?” he asks back, looking so deeply into me that I shiver. “What do you do here?”

We leave Seattle and drive up the Alcan Highway in the big pickup truck Len has outfitted for the Arctic. He’s from California; I’m from all over. Neither of us has ever been in really cold country, but he’s read everything about surviving in the cold, keeping your truck running and so forth. He’s got everything planned and most things we’ll need are packed in a carrier on the roof.
It’s February and it’s still cold, around fifteen below, as we drive north through British Columbia and then into the Yukon Territory. When we have to get out of the truck to gas up or take a pee, the cold washes effortlessly through the soles of our boots. It freezes the hairs in our noses; it freezes our eyelashes.

We take turns driving until we are both exhausted, then pull off to the side. We climb in back and heat canned stew on the little kerosene stove; we eat it out of our big tin cups. Then we sleep close and tight in our zipped-together bags.

Len loves the power of this cold. The cold, he says, purifies everything, killing all the putrid crap. It is purifying us. He can feel it.

Do I feel it? Maybe.

We drive north. The sky pales and expands; the trees shrink and the landscape empties. The sun must be somewhere, but I don’t see it. It seems that we are driving along on Mars.

We are tired and stiff from long days in the truck. Yet we are happy and in perfect harmony. We are already becoming free, Len says. See?

I just look at him. Whatever it is he’s figured out, I want to know too.

We drive north. We cross into Alaska from the Yukon. Now the truck’s heater can’t keep up with the cold, and we bring the sleeping bags up to the cab to drape over us as we drive. We keep the water bottle in the cab so it won’t freeze. At night, we put the bottle in bed with us to keep it warm so we’ll have water for coffee in the morning.

One morning the truck won’t start and I’m scared. We are alone in the middle of frozen nowhere; it seems that if something goes wrong, it wouldn’t take long to die. But Len has read up on what to do if this happens. He gets out his little Primus camp stove, fires it up, and rolls under the truck to position the stove beneath the oil pan. In fifteen minutes the truck catches hold.

Len smiles the wondering smile of a six-year-old genius.

“Doubt if you’ll find a place to stay,” a service station guy in an insulated jumpsuit tells us when we finally and triumphantly hit Fairbanks. People are still flooding in to work on the pipeline, he says; they come in from the airport by the busload, even though most of them don’t have a prayer of a job. Too, the pipeline companies have grabbed up most of the apartments and motel rooms for their own big shots.

“You’re probably thinking campground,” the guy says, glancing out at
our truck. But the campgrounds are full, even now, he tells us. Everything that can be divided up already has been; people even started dividing their trailer houses up into three or four cubicles.

“This one lady in the paper,” the guy says. “She rented out the space between her washer and dryer for somebody to sleep in.”

The guy says he’s tired of it and he’s going back down to Minnesota when he gets the money for a plane ticket.

“It’s mostly guys from Texas and Oklahoma that get the pipeline jobs,” he tells us. “They’ve got it all fixed with their union. If you’re not one of their boys, forget it.”

We pull out into the clogged traffic of Airport Way. It’s trucks mostly, everything stop-and-go, everybody pumping out exhaust that freezes into a fog. The snow that edges the roads is a filthy gray.

It’s 1975, and Len had known about the pipeline. But he thought it would be far away, lost in the immense space of Alaska, a little trickle of silver sliding alone silently in the vast slope of snow. He had not thought of it being right here, a fat ugly snake of greed and pollution; he had not imagined it strangling the little snow-covered log-cabin town he had fallen in love with as he lay on his bunk in Folsom.

We battle the traffic until we get out of town and can pull over onto a bare piece of ground.

We sit for a while, our engine running, pumping our own frozen exhaust into the air. I look for myself in the side-view mirror but everything is frozen and fogged and I’m nowhere to be seen.

Len thinks for a long time. Then he turns to me and smiles his Jesus smile.

“Good,” he says. “Now we see why we have to go out to our land.”

It looks for a while like we might have to sleep in the truck until spring. Then a guy who manages a hardware store tells us that for three hundred a month we can set up a tent alongside his cabin out on Chena Hot Springs Road. Since we don’t have a tent, the guy says for another couple hundred he can rent us a double-sided tent he has along with the insulation to go between the walls. He can rent us flooring and a chunk of carpet to help hold the heat. We have one woodstove with us, but the guy in the store—X-Man he says his name is—convinces Len that since it’s a tent we need
two woodstoves, one at each end. The guy rents us the extra stove for fifty a month. Len tries to give him a check on his California bank, but X-Man says, that’s all right, he can carry us until we go to the bank and get cash. X-Man says he guesses he knows where we live. Len laughs and puts his checkbook back in his pack.

X-Man says, too, the interest rate up here for loans is ten percent a month, what with all the coming and going. He’s got to remember he’s a businessman, he says, much as he’d rather just help us out.

Len smiles his Jesus smile.

“Sure,” he says.

The hardware store is warm, and there are rocking chairs in back beside the stove. It’s nice to sit in a chair after so long on the road; we both kind of go into a trance. We sit there for a couple of hours. When X-Man isn’t waiting on customers, he comes back and talks. He’s a big guy and a big talker and he seems glad to have us sit there and listen. He’s a native Alaskan, he tells us; his great-grandfather was a Klondiker in 1898, one of the few to make it on foot over the White Pass Trail with his hundred pounds of supplies. Most people fell by the wayside, he tells us. Thousands of men either gave up or died or sometimes went insane, it was so bad.

X-Man goes on to tell us we don’t know how lucky we are to actually have land. Everybody in Alaska wants land, he says, even people who’ve lived their whole lives here, people you would think had a right. But no such thing, X-Man says. The Feds own it all. Do we realize what percentage of Alaska is owned by actual people, not counting Natives? One percent. And why is that? Why can’t people get land to live on? Why don’t they open it back up to homesteading like in the old days, when America was really America?

We don’t know. X-Man says he sure as hell doesn’t know either.

Why Alaska ever wanted to be part of the United States, he says, is beyond him. If people would get off their rears, maybe they could get up a secession movement. But people just don’t have that much balls. Balls, he says, went out in the old days.

Len shrugs and smiles

X-Man smiles too and stops ranting about everything.

“I’m glad you’re here, man,” X-Man says. “You and your lady.”

He winks at me.

“Hard to keep a good lady up here,” he says.
The next day we go out to where X-Man lives and set up our tent next to his little house. It’s hard working in the cold; despite thick gloves, we don’t have long until our hands start to freeze and we have to get back in the truck with the heater on. Len hates to sit in the truck with the exhaust pumping out into the environment, but neither of us can do anything with our hands frozen. Neither of us is big, but we are both pretty strong in a stringy, little-person way and we work well together setting all this stuff up. Once we get the floorboards set and the outer tent up, we come inside, light a kerosene lantern, and start putting up the slabs of insulation. Then it’s not too hard to set up the inner tent. We set up the woodstoves and work the stovepipe out through the holes already cut in the tent canvas. We bring in some of the wood we bought from X-Man and get a fire going.

We put up folding chairs and a folding table that Len had packed on top of the truck. We get out the teakettle and put it on the stove. The tent starts to get a little warm and the water in the kettle even boils; then here we are sitting at our table drinking tea.

Len smiles.
“See?” he says.

X-Man comes by when he gets home from work.
“Pretty good,” he says looking around.
We all sit by the stove and drink tea.
X-Man says he still can’t believe how lucky we are to actually own land in the bush. He just thinks we are so darn lucky.
He says he sure hopes the land we bought is one of the old homesteads that people really have title to. These days, he says, lots of people think they’ve got land to buy and sell. Turns out it’s usually federal land and nobody has a right to it. Sooner or later, the BLM’ll find you and throw you off, no matter how hidden in the bush you think you are.
Those BLM guys are mother-fuckers, X-Man says; you don’t leave that very minute, they burn your cabin and shoot your dogs.
He sits and shakes his head over the badness of the BLM.
Len pours more tea.
X-Man tells us more Alaska stories. He tells a story of this woman living out in the bush who went crazy and started building a wooden walkway that began at her cabin and then just headed nowhere. All she would
do was work on that walkway, even though she was about two hundred miles from anywhere.

“Lots of people go crazy out there,” X-Man says.

“Lots of people go crazy lots of places,” Len says, smiling.

Is our place an old homestead, I ask when X-Man is gone. Len says yes; he’s got the original papers from the 1960s to prove it. He says he’ll dig them out and show me if I want.

I say no that’s OK. If he’s sure.

“I’m sure,” he says. “But I would go anyway. Even if I weren’t.”

We settle in to wait for the spring thaw, “breakup” they call it. Just about all we have to do is wait and Len is happy waiting. He can sit beside the stove all day, drinking tea and poring over the plans that he has laid out on the little table, studying up on how to build a nice, tight cabin out of three-sided logs. There’s an old cabin up there now, Len tells me; but it’s probably pretty dilapidated. We’ll need something better by winter.

He sits all day in the light from the kerosene lamp, studying things. He loves all the lore about how to live in the bush. He especially loves an article he has about how to set nets under the frozen surface of a river to catch fish year-round.

“Just think,” he says. “Under all that ice, they’re having a gay old time.”

It’s late February now, and every day there’s more light. If it’s getting warmer, though, it’s hard to tell.

“Be careful,” X-Man tells us on one of his visits to the tent. “When it goes up to ten below after it’s been forty below, you think it’s warm.”

That’s a good way to freeze to death, he tells us.

“It happens to newcomers every spring,” he says. “Just because it’s not as bad as it was, you think it isn’t bad. But it is.”

“That guy,” Len says when he’s gone. “He thinks he knows what bad is.”

However bad or not bad the cold is, we are fairly warm in our double-sided tent. During the day we keep the fire going in the two stoves. At
night we let one stove go out and just keep a fire in the airtight. It’s a good stove because it will hold a fire all night. Because it’s so efficient, it doesn’t pollute too much.

We spend a lot of time in bed, snuggling in the goose-down bags. We cuddle and screw. Len dreams out loud of our place on the river. How the water will gently gleam in the soft white Arctic light, how the nights will glow and the stars will dance. How tired and innocent and good we will be when, after our long days of fishing and berry-picking and water-hauling, we come in, finally, to the warm lamplight.

“Don’t be afraid of X-Man,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ve known a hundred X-Men.”

Then, as if drugged by his dreams, Len drops into a deep sleep, barely moving for ten or twelve hours.

I can’t sleep the long hours he can. Sometimes I light a lantern and just lie there, warm in goose down, watching him sleep. With his shining eyes closed, he looks different. Smaller. Older. Worried. This, I guess, is the part of him left over from prison.

Len has never asked me for anything, never said anything about me kicking in some cash. And I’ve never asked him how much money he has. He’s careful what he spends though, and I worry it could cost more than he thinks to get out of Fairbanks and up to the land.

“Why don’t I see if I can pick up work,” I tell him after a week. “While we’re waiting. Might as well pull in a few bucks.”

He looks up from the book he is studying. It’s a book about geodesic domes. Seeing how well this double-sided tent works, he’s wondering if, instead of the log house he has planned, he could maybe build a double-sided dome with foot-thick insulation between the sides. X-Man has been telling him how expensive it will be to have the three-sided logs floated in on the river. And how, what with the pipeline, you can’t hire people to do things even if you can pay.

Len looks at me like he sometimes does, like he is seeing me there for the first time and is surprised, thinking: Wow, who is this great girl standing here?

“OK,” he says. “Good.”

“Len,” I say. “You are the most beautiful person I’ve ever known.”

He smiles and dips his head a little, like, yeah, I can’t help it.
It’s not hard to get on waitressing at a steak house on the dinner shift. It’s a hassle driving to the restaurant on the clogged roads, and sometimes when the ice fog is especially thick I feel like I’m driving blind; I expect a pipeline truck to plow into me any minute. But when I get to the restaurant it’s warm and bright. The salary is good, and the tips are the best I’ve ever seen.

It’s true this place is up to its neck in money, and money seems to be all anybody can talk about. Up on the pipeline, it doesn’t matter if you are an engineer or a cook or what, you can make thousands a month. So people say. Your room and board are free and all you eat is steak and lobster.

Just about everybody is trying to figure how to get on the line somehow.

The other girls working at the restaurant are friendly enough but rowdy. All of them are from someplace else—Texas and Oklahoma, lots of them—and they’ve all come up with boyfriends or husbands who are out on the line. All of their boyfriends or husbands are trying to get them on as chambermaids or cooks’ helpers. Anything. It doesn’t matter; it’s big money no matter what you do.

In the kitchen they all yak about their plans for being Alaska-rich when they get home. It appears they all want a split-level house with a swimming pool. Their husbands are going to set up in business, and they are going to have kids and be the foxiest PTA moms ever. They’ll make all the moms who’ve never been out of Tulsa just burn.

We have the best steaks in Fairbanks—so we claim anyhow—and now and then we get a guy that the girls will peg as a pimp. One of them, Harold, takes a big interest in us waitresses. He’s plump and black and shows up most nights for dinner. He’s always laughing a big pink laugh and always hinting that for classy girls like us there are better ways to make money than waitressing.

In the kitchen everybody laughs and screams about who will be first to take Harold up on his offer. Maybe it would be fun, they say. For a little while. Just until their husbands come down from the line. Maybe it would be an adventure before going home.

Harold seems pretty small-time, but there’s one guy who comes swishing in around ten like he owns the place. He’s dark and flashy and for a second I think I know him from somewhere, Reno maybe. But up close I see
he’s not the guy I’m thinking of; this guy’s wearing his own hair, for one thing.

He wears a white shirt and tie under a wolf-fur parka, and he keeps his money in a clip that he leaves on the table while he eats. When he’s ready to pay, he rolls a hundred dollar bill off the top and you can see all the hundreds underneath.

The girls don’t want to wait on him because they think he’s wearing eyeliner and they can’t stand queers.

I wait on him because he tips better than anybody. Anyway, I doubt being queer is the worst thing about him. The girls who come in with him look way too young, for one thing.

His drink is a White Russian and every time he orders, he asks me to sniff the cream they use in the bar to make sure it’s fresh. He adds five dollars to the tip just for that. I say I will sniff the cream, but I don’t. I let him take his chances.

It’s a fairly nice restaurant, but like all restaurants, it stinks. The kitchen stinks of grease and food rotting in places you can’t reach to clean. In the bar, you smell all the booze that’s been spilled on the floor since the Gold Rush probably. The ashtrays of course stink and even the clean napkins smell of a thousand people wiping their mouths. The carpets are always filthy, though we vacuum them every night. I breathe it all in and think of the land we are going to, so pure, so clean, so crudless.

When I get home I take water from the teakettle and fill a basin; I sponge myself all over so Len doesn’t have to smell the dirty restaurant on me.

X-Man is always dropping by. Len is nice to him, but I notice that his face gets the old, small look when X-Man is there.

“You’re just plain lucky,” X-Man keeps telling us.

“Some people got all the luck,” he says. “That’s all there is to it. Let’s just hope that land of yours is good.”

“It’s good,” Len says.

X-Man says he bets it is. He sure does hope it is. He shakes his head and laughs.

“What’s funny,” I ask him.

“Oh,” he says. “Nothing. I was just thinking about this guy who was up last spring.”

“What about him?”

X-Man says, oh, it’s just a story about a guy who came up from some-
where. Arizona or somewhere. X-Man got to know the guy because he was always hanging around the store. Anyhow, breakup came, and this guy loaded all his stuff in a boat and went out to some land he had title to. Come to think of it, this guy had two boats; he had his sled dogs with him, so they had to go in their own boat.

“Are you taking dogs?” he interrupts himself to ask.

Len says he’ll see.

Anyhow, X-Man says, this guy landed somewhere way up on the Porcupine River. One of the boats was a motorboat and it was pulling the second boat that had the dogs in it. The guy had to figure out how to tie the dogs in, so they wouldn’t get away.

“That must have been quite a sight,” X-Man says. “Must have looked like Noah’s Ark.”

He laughs to think of it.

Long story short, he says, when this guy got to his land, where it had been described to him to be, he nosed his boat in and jumped off.

“What do you think happened?” X-Man asks us.

“The dogs got untied and ran off?” I guess.

“Worse ’n that. Oh, much worse ’n that.”

Neither of us asks him what happened.

“What happened,” X-man says, “is that the guy jumped off his boat and he sank up to mid-thigh. Nothing there but marsh. He tried wading but there wasn’t nothing to wade to.”

“What did he do?” I ask.

X-Man shakes his head.

“Nothing to do but come back. And I believe, come to think of it, he did lose the dogs on the way back down. Boy, that guy was busted when he got back.”

We sit there and drink tea and wish he would go away.

How did Len manage to get his hands on the land, X-Man wants to know.

Len says it was just one of those things.

“Where’s it at?” X-Man asks.

“It’s on the Yukon,” Len says. “North of Circle City. We’ll put in the river there at Circle. Just as soon as the road opens up.”

“You got it on the map?” X-Man asks.

Len gets out one of his maps and puts a little pencil dot where our land is.

X-Man takes the map. He pushes his glasses up on his forehead and looks hard at the little dot. He measures how far it is from Circle with
his finger. He asks us who the guy was we bought it from. Len says it was somebody he met in California.

“California,” X-Man laughs. “Probably couldn’t stick it up here.”

“Could be,” Len says.

X-Man says that sounds real believable because it’s only a certain type of person who can make it in the bush. He tells a story about a couple of guys who’d been out there too long and started thinking a Sasquatch was prowling around their place. One of the guys got so freaked he ended up shooting his buddy by mistake. Shot him dead. Tried to hide it and ended up in prison.

“You’re taking guns, I suppose,” X-Man says.

Len smiles.

“Sure. Want to see my guns?”

But X-Man doesn’t want to see them.

“I didn’t know you had guns,” I say when X-Man is gone.

Len smiles and shrugs like Jesus would shrug if he didn’t want to talk about whether he had guns or not.

The guy who may or may not be wearing eyeliner knows to sit in my section. He’s not friendly and doesn’t want to chat, but he does let me know that he has a strip club out on the Old Richardson Highway. The strippers there are professionals he tells me. Only the best. He flies them up from Vegas.

He gives me a look like don’t even think you could be a stripper.

On the other hand, he tells me, he’s always looking for local talent as dancers. It’s just regular girls. Not too fat. Not too short.

He nods toward the girls he’s got with him. They eat and don’t say anything. They are not too fat or too short, I guess, is the point.

All you do is dance in a T-shirt and hot pants up on a stage, the guy says. There’s a couple of bouncers and nobody gets close. Afterward you can walk around for tips.

He gives me his card with his personal telephone number handwritten on the back in case I decide to try out dancing.

The girls watch me to see if I turn it over to look at the number.

Supposedly spring is coming.

“Careful,” X-Man drops in to warn. “Spring is when most people commit suicide. I never heard why. Maybe they get their hopes up too much.”
Even though spring is coming, the bowl Fairbanks sits in is still filled up with ice fog. It seems like the fog is getting, if possible, thicker. Coming back from the restaurant one night, I lose the road and end up on an abandoned train track. I have to hitch a ride home. The next day we hitch back to get the truck loose. But it’s stuck between the ties and Len says we’ll need a tow truck.

“Oh, you won’t get a tow truck inside six weeks,” X-Man says when we ask him if he knows anybody. “If that. They’re all up on the line.”

X-Man gets a laugh out of it.

“Guess you won’t be going anywhere anytime soon,” he says.

Len and I hitch back out. We dig and push and spin the wheels for half a day and don’t look at each other. Finally a couple of guys stop. They have a winch on the front of their rig. They hook up to us and we push from the back and finally manage to lurch the truck up over the ties.

Len has his little stove and he crawls under the truck with it to thaw out the oil pan.

Overhead, I notice, are Northern Lights, the first I’ve seen, dancing all crazy colors.

Len comes out to look.

“Would you call any of that green?” he asks.

“No,” I say. “I would call it blue and white.”

X-Man’s rig is there when we get back and his lights are on. He doesn’t come out to congratulate us on getting our truck out though.

Everybody in Fairbanks bets on when breakup will come. For two bucks you can fill out a little card with the day, hour, minute, and second you think the ice will melt at a certain spot on the Tanana River. The person whose guess is closest gets thousands of dollars.

I don’t win. But when breakup comes at the end of April, Len and I go out to a bulk store where people from the interior—Natives mostly—stock up for six months at a time. We load up on flour and sugar, bulgur and rice. We get cans of honey and of lard. We get dried fruit for vitamins until we have our own berries. We buy a couple of gallon jars of dried salmon until we can start getting our own fish. We throw in some canned sausages in case we get the craving for meat before Len can shoot a moose.

“I’ll shoot a moose for food,” he tells me. “But I don’t want to catch anything in a trap, even there is good money for the fur. OK?”
“OK,” I say.

X-Man stops by and tells us we need to pay up pretty soon. We are into our second month now and we still owe him for everything. X-Man says we’d better go ahead and pay up because he’d hate to have to take our truck. He would sure hate to have to do something like that. He says he’s not cut out for business, that’s his problem.

Len smiles and tells X-Man not to worry. He won’t have to take our truck.

A few nights later the guy who owns the strip club tells me I should come out sometime and see how good his dancers have it. He’s got a shortage of dancers right now, he says.

You can make a lot, he tells me. If you’re good. If you’re into it. If you’ve got the legs. It’s more of a leg job than anything.

The girls make so much, they take trips to Hawaii every month, he says. They leave Fairbanks on the midnight flight and they’re in Hawaii by seven in the morning.

“Who gets to go to Hawaii?” one of the girls with him says. It’s the first thing I’ve heard either of them say, though they’ve both been in a few times. “I never got to go to Hawaii.”

“If you tried a little harder you could so shut up,” he tells her.

The girl reaches out and knocks over her drink on purpose. She’d had a sloe gin fizz so now everything is blood red. There’s red splattered on the guy’s white shirt.

He slaps her and knocks over his drink with his elbow. He grabs her and shakes her so her head kind of bobbles. He bangs her around so much that all the glasses and a plate of onion rings go crashing to the floor. The busboy runs over and starts sopping at the guy’s shirt with a towel. I crawl under the table to pick the broken stuff up.

At about the same time I hear the girl finally start to cry, I see the guy’s money clip lying on the carpet, the bills wet and pink. I manage to get ten or so out before I slide the clip back up onto the table. Both of the girls are crying now, but silently, their hand in their laps, their faces scrunched like babies.

“So much guy in the restaurant dropped his money clip,” I whisper to Len that night when I get in bed. “I took out some bills, nine hundred dollars. He didn’t notice because he was hitting a girl.”
“Did you know you can fly to Hawaii in six hours,” I say. “There’s a flight every midnight. The hookers fly there every month. Supposedly.”
Len tightens his arms around me.
“Do you want to fly to Hawaii?” he asks.
I think about the warm air and the warm water and the gleaming beach. I think about the girls lying in the sun, their bodies brown and oily, their faces behind sunglasses only a little beat-up.
“No,” I say. “I want to go out to our land.”
We get up and get dressed. We don’t light lanterns but we open the stove doors. In the low light, we pack our clothes and dishes and books and the supplies we have brought inside. We take down the shelves Len has put up and tie the boards together. At four we are all packed up; we get back in the bags and sleep for a few hours, then get up and stuff the sleeping bags and roll up the mattress. When X-Man’s truck pulls away at nine, we knock the fire out of the stoves and break down the stovepipes. We load them in the truck. We take down the tent and load it. It’s a tight fit, but we get the insulation and carpet in too. Len stands looking at the platform, but decides it will take too long to knock it apart and load it on top of the truck.
Before we leave, he takes off his California plates and wires on some Oregon plates he happens to have.
We fight the morning traffic out of town. But instead of heading up the Steese Highway, we get back on Highway 2 driving south.
“This isn’t the way up to Circle,” I say. “This is the way back down.”
“We’re not putting in at Circle,” Len tells me. “We’re putting in at Eagle. We have to drive down to Tok Junction and cut north.”
He pulls over to the side of the road and gets out his map and a pencil. He erases the dot he showed X-Man and makes another dot on a little river that shoots off the Yukon.
Len smiles at me.
“Poor old X-Man,” Len says. “He’s really not cut out for business.”